DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 638 CS 504 528

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TITLE Conference Presentations.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Minority Training Institute at the Annual International Convention of The Council for Exceptional Children (61st, Detroit, MI, April 4-8, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiovisual Aids; Communication Apprehension; *Conference Papers; Public Speaking; Search Strategies; Speech Communication; *Speeches; *Speech Skills; Writing (Composition); Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Speech Writing

ABSTRACT

Developing a conference presentation involves both assembling and delivering the materials. In selecting a topic, speakers should consider their own prior knowledge and experience, the topic's interest and significance for them as well as for the audience, and the amount of information available. They can research materials on the chosen topic efficiently through a database computer search and can then construct an outline to insure that the ideas will be organized and sufficiently supported or amplified to meet the needs of the presentation. They should connect the three main parts to a presentation--introduction, body, and conclusion--with clear transitions, and create a brief, clear, and provocative title. The materials may be presented in any of four ways: impromptu, extemporaneously, by reading, or from memory. Whichever format they choose, speakers should concentrate on meanings, talk with rather than at the audience, and punctuate and support ideas with voice and body. They can relieve stagefright by remembering that such feelings are normal and by being thoroughly prepared with both information and practice. Audiovisual aids can give clarity and justification to the presentation, so long as speakers keep their attention on the audience and use the simplest, most direct audiovisual format. (HTH)

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ED240638

Conference Presentations

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Paper Presented

at the

Council for Exceptional Children,

Minority Training Institute

Detroit, Michigan, 1983

CS 504 528

Conference Presentations

The present presentaton came about as a result of a recommendation that was made at the Minority Groups Concern Committee in New York City in 1981. The primary purpose of the recommendation was to increase minority participation in conferences of the Council for Exceptional Children.

The presentation is organized into two major parts. The first part offers suggestions on developing a conference presentation and the second part involves suggestions for presenting a paper or research at a conference.

Developing A Conference Presentation

Once you have decided to present a conference the second step is to select a suitable topic. In attempting to select a topic, there are several guidelines that you should follow:

1. First is your own experience. It is generally unwise to choose a topic that you know absolutely nothing about. Experience, however is not the whole answer for deciding what you should select as a topic, for sometimes persons with an abundance of experiences develop papers or presentations that are not well received, primarily because what they had to say was trite and familiar.

2. Prior knowledge is a second factor to be considered. If you do not know your topic, you must be willing to invest a greate deal of time researching it.

3. The availability of material becomes a third determinant. Do not select a topic without making a preliminary survey of the resources for obtaining information. Unless you make an inventory, you may find that there is not enough material to adequately develop your topic.

4. Try to select a topic that you have an interest in and that has significance for professionals in the field. Try brainstorming, that is let your mind run freely over all kinds of subject matter. Try to see what is interesting about you or your job that might be of interest to others in the field of exceptional children.

5. Review past Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) conference programs and exceptional children journals. Make a list of the types of presentations that were made and articles that were published. By exploring these sources, you might find issues or topics that are extremely significant and of high interest to professionals in the field of exceptional children Certainly these sources should give you some idea of possible topics that you might want to explore.

Researching the Topic

Once you have decided on a topic the next step is to go out and collect general kinds of information that your presentation requires. One way to collect additional information is through a computer search. Computer searches (like ERIC) are very valuable and they save you valuable time. To do a computer search one should go through a University library or even CEC. Generally you should go to the reference librarian or ask at the information desk in the library. To start a search you should first write down the title of your presentation. Next, the library staff member will help you to decide on the appropriate descriptors. This material will be typed into a system (computer system) and generally within seven (7) to ten (10) days you will receive a list of articles and books similar to the article or presentation that you are working on. The material will include a print out of the authors and sources of the material. Small abstracts are also available with each article or book for a small fee.

Once you have decided on the books or articles that you need for your presentation, you should go to the journals and xerox those articles that you will need for your presentation. In cases where books are required, you should go to the card catalog and check them out. In cases where articles or books are not available, you should check on borrowing materials through inter-library loans. Thoroughly researching your topic is an important step that must not be overlooked. Attempting to take a short cut or refusing to thoroughly research a topic can certainly lead to a poor presentation.

Outlining the Topic

Constructing an outline insures that your ideas will be organized and sufficiently supported or amplified to meet the needs of your presentation. Outlining further assures that you will consider the logical relationships

among ideas and the weights you need to give them. Finally, the act of outling and the use of an outline are exceptionally helpful in setting your ideas firmly in your mind, so you can command them confidently as you prepare your presentation.

Function of Outlines

Your own needs and preferences will probably determine what kind of outlines you prepare (key word, phrases, or full-sentence). In any case, you will surely need to outline your presentation in some degree or detail. To do so is a far better preparatory procedure than writing a presentation in full before you have inspected the basic structure.

Main Components of a Presentation

There are primarily three main parts to a presentation, an introduction, body, and conclusion. There also needs to be clear connections that link the three main portions. These linking parts are called transitions. A presentation has a beginning, middle, end and internal transition elements. Lets briefly look at each separately.

Introduction

Since the introduction is the beginning it should (1) attract favorable attention of the audience, (2) provide necessary background so that the audience may comprehend what follows, (3) be suitable for the occasion; and (4) contribute to your own ease during a crucial period of adjustment. In addition, it ought to be coordinated with and must relate to the body of the presentation.

At the onset you must gain attention in such a way that your audience wants to go on listening. You may start with reference to its purpose, or begin with greetings, an anecdote or analogy. On the other hand you may need to awaken the audience by sharpening the focus of their attention. Shocking

or startling assertions, and unfamiliar statistics may enable you to create curiosity.

Body of the Presentation

The body of a presentation comprises (1) the main points, (2) the material that supports or amplifies these points, and (3) transitional phases or sentences.

You must sort and sift materials to arrive at main points, and you must remember that your main points are clear and simple.

Transitions

Transitions are words, phrases, sentences, or groups of sentences that join ideas together. Transitions are the signposts. They tell your audience where you have been, where you are, or where you intend to go. They are most frequently needed at the completion of a main idea, before you move on to the next one; but you may also need them as connections between subsidiary points or phrases leading to the ideas in single sentences. Some examples of transitions are as follows:

1. Since we have already considered..., we should adopt...
2. In addition to...there is another outstanding reason (element, factor, consideration, fact)...
3. We have seen..., yet it remains for us to observe...
4. But...is only one important viewpoint. Equally important is...
5. Since...is so, what can be said of...? (Questions can often be useful as transitions.)

Where the thought connection to be emphasized is between subpoints, or where the thought relationships are easy to comprehend, a phrase or even a single word such as so or yet may be adequate to tie ideas together. Some examples of such phrasing are:

1. More important than all this is the fact that. . .
2. In contrast to . . .
3. Viewed from a different angle the problem seems to be . . .
4. This last point raises a question . . .?
5. What was the result? Just this. . .
6. On the other hand. . .
7. When this has been done. . .
8. And so you can see that. . .

Seek variety in transitions. Avoid using only stock phrases or repeating the same few phrases over and over. A mark of an unpolished presentation is the tendency to use and, also, or like as transitions. This gives the impression of having carelessly tacked ideas together.

Conclusions

The next segment of your presentation is its conclusion. In this segment you should restate your core idea or sum up the main points that clarify or prove your thesis. The final part of your presentation should be used to drive home the core idea.

Selecting a Title

The final segment in preparing your presentation is to select a title. Whether it is an individual or group presentation that you are seeking a title for, you ought to make the title brief, clear, and provocative. You will want it to arouse interest and reveal in some degree what the presentation is about.

In selecting a title two kinds of mistakes often occur: (1) using vague, umbrella titles, and (2) using titles that are all but riddles.

A title for any presentation ought to do specific work: convey a promise that can be understood and do it with quick provocativeness.

Delivering Your Presentation At A Conference

There are four general ways to deliver a presentation: impromptu, extemporaneously, by reading it, and from memory. I will discuss only the first three, and then I will make some general suggestions for delivering a presentation.

You may be among the many who confuse impromptu speaking with extemporaneous speaking. The impromptu manner of presentating is one in which you make no formal preparation until a few minutes before you begin to talk. Impromptu speaking is a spur-of-the moment activity and is almost never a satisfactory way of speaking if one has had any forewarning at all.

In extemporaneous speaking you will have had time to think out what to say and will have planned with considerable care. You will probably have outlined your plan and also rehearsed orally. Finally, you will present your thoughts publicly with or without notes to guide you. In this kind of delivery you can be at your best as a communicator. You have freedom to adjust to the speech situation, you can be spontaneous in language, and most important, you can converse with your audience directly.

Reading Your Presentation

If we put aside private reasons such as personal convenience or uncertainty, there remain but two good reasons for reading to an audience: (1) to bring something new and unusual to the fore or (2) to give listeners meanings they would not get from reading the material by themselves.

Reading a presentation involves stirring up meanings in those who listen. By uttering the sounds of words on a page, you translate the words into meaning.

Most people read poorly because they are not aware of what is involved in getting and giving meaning. This is a sufficient reason for discouraging the reading of presentations.

General Principles to Consider in Reading a Presentation

1. Cultivate the ability to group and pause. Grouping or phrasing is the art of breaking a text up into ideas or speech units. A word is a grammatical unit, the idea is the speech unit. In reading a presentation the inexperienced tend to group mechanically at the end of each line, a practice to be avoided. You must learn to group by thought.

You should be aware that there are two types of punctuation, oral and written. Oral punctuation makes meanings clear to an auditor by noticeable changes in voice or action, as written punctuation makes similar meanings clear to a reader. The two kinds of punctuation do not always coincide. There are many times when you will want to ignore the written punctuation altogether. Pausing at every comma or period does not always enhance meaning. It may confuse. One who reads aloud must determine in advance which written punctuation will assist in grouping audible thought and which will not. Punctuation in oral reading, as in speaking, is achieved by changes in volume, rate and by gestures and other bodily movements that make groups of words stand out clearly.

2. Cultivate ability to subordinate ideas. You must realize in reading that ideas are not all of the same value. Some ideas are subordinate to others. They support and amplify. You must therefore, try to convey these relationships of degree by voice, gesture, and movement. Emphasize the most important ideas and deemphasize the less important ones. If you read every word in the same way at the same rate and volume, you will be boring.

3. Cultivate ability to maintain visual directness. Presenters who bury their noses in their papers on the lectern destroy the liveliness that ought to prevail during the presentation.

Preserving visual contact with an audience during reading is a skill attained only through practice. The process demands a high degree of physical coordination with memory. In short, visual directness - or its absence - usually reveals the reader has thoroughly or haphazardly prepared.

4. Pretend you are presenting the material for the first time. However to give the audience the illusion of the first time one must study the material, resources of delivery, and practice.

Suggestions for Delivering a Presentation

The most important point to remember about delivery is that a good delivery helps the audience to concentrate on what is being said; it does not attract attention to itself. If you adopt this as your governing principle in actual speaking, the following principles will be relatively easy to observe.

1. You should not speak to exhibit your graces or clothing. You should concentrate on meanings.

2. Your mind should be on the meaning of what you are saying.

3. Talk with the audience, not at them.

4. Be direct and look at the audience. Try looking at a segment of the audience as you develop an idea. When you have finished with that idea, and as you start the next one, direct your gaze to another part of the audience.

5. Punctuate and support ideas with your voice and body. In presenting facial expressions, variations in vocal rate and volume, pauses, shifts in posture and walking take the place of commas and periods in written communication.

Audience Fright

Although everyone will not admit it, most presenters are apprehensive about facing audiences. If you are worried about how your audience will react, rest assured that your concern is normal. Doubt, which is felt by most good presenters in some degree results in fear and anxiety, producing conflict. How to resolve such conflict and still adjust optimally to an audience, becomes a special problem.

At the outset, you ought to remind yourself that the real causes of audience fright are psychological. For the most part attitude is at the bottom of the matter. Lack of self-confidence results in fear. Insecurity stems from the uncertainties of the situation. Literally, you become afraid if you feel you may lose control of the audience. Or you may be apprehensive about your mastery of what you are going to say.

How can you reduce fear and subsequently, the tensions that afflict you? The solution to this problem involves going back to the causes to see what can be done to remove them.

First, realize that everyone at some time experiences the same apprehensions you do. The most any presenter can do is guess how an audience will react, then calmly calculate how best to promote the responses he or she seeks. Insights to human behavior come with experience. Realize this fact, but make educated guesses on how you can best adapt to your particular audience to get the people to react as you want them to.

A second way to cope with audience fright is to be thoroughly prepared. If you are not well prepared and think you are not worth listening to, you will certainly be fearful of the reception you will receive. But such doubts will have no foundation if you prepare wisely. Pay careful attention to your pattern of organization, to your supporting and amplifying materials, to phrases of greatest importance, and to potentially troublesome spots in your presentation.

Wise preparation inevitably involves oral rehearsal and practice. Through rehearsal you learn that you can, indeed, succeed.

Proper attitude, preparation, practice and movement are effective means to help eliminate audience fright however the wish to communicate is perhaps the most powerful protection against audience fright. If you want to present,

you have won half the battle in most instances. If you are well prepared and are determined to convince the audience to accept your point of view, you have come a long way toward releasing your tensions into constructive actions that will contribute to the accomplishment of your goals.

Practice and Attitudes Toward Presenting

Rehearsing a presentation can insure mastery of your plan, rememberance of the succession of points in it, and confidence in your skills in delivery. But how you practice makes a difference. If you rehearse wisely, rehearsal becomes an avenue to confidence. The following suggestions are made to assist you in making your presentation, and following them should give you considerable reassurance and clarity of mind when you go before an audience.

1. Read through your written presentation, fixing your mind on the succession of main points. Reread it, this time concentrating not only on the main points but on the details supporting each point.

2. Speak through the presentation in whatever words happen to come. Talk out loud and try out gestures as you verbalize. Go through the whole presentation and if you bungle a part, go right on to the end without stopping to straighten out the troublesome section. Come back to the troublesome section when you have finished running through the entire presentation.

3. Without using your written presentation (except those notes you will use on the platform) stand up and speak through the presentation.

4. When you can get through the total presentation fairly well, time yourself and adjust the presentaton to the time allotted. Such an adjustment may call for condensations, or it may call for expansions of points.

5. In the moments before speaking keep the plan of your presentation upper most in your mind; review it. This is the most constructive outlet for tensions.

6. Just before speaking renew your desire to share a worthwhile message with others. Remind yourself that the experience before you is an opportunity. You have earned that opportunity through the knowledge you have acquired and your position as a respected professional.

7. Recall that your listeners are persons not very different from yourself, that they want you to succeed.

8. Do not expect to avoid all tension. Some tension is good for you and can serve you positively by increasing your alertness.

9. Avoid last minute changes in your presentation. Do not add to uneasiness by entertaining misgivings about choices already made. Adapt to the moment and to other speakers but do not make changes that undermine the overall plan you established in your mind.

Using Audiovisual Aids

Appropriately used, audiovisual aids can give clarity and justification to what you say. The problem is that audiovisual aids are often unwisely introduced or clumsily used. Two of the major reasons for using audiovisual aids in presentations are to enhance attention by introducing change, and to relax your audience by letting them get information from a new source. Here are a few do's and don'ts to remember about audiovisual aids.

1. Introduce visual aids or other resources where you think your best verbal presentation will fall short of clarity.

2. Verbalize what your audience is suppose to see or hear from any audiovisual resources you introduce.

3. Edit material that is irrelevant or that might send your audience's thoughts in the improper direction.

4. Pretest the working of your aid.

5. Give your attention to the audience when using audiovisual aids not the devices.

6. Use the simplest form of audiovisual stimuli that is capable of doing what you want done.

The most important advice for all presenters who use audiovisual aids is: keep yourself in charge and maintain the closest personal relation with your audience. Remember that you are still the chief messenger.

Reference

Much of he material for the presentation was taken from the following text.

Wilson, J. F. & Arnold, C. C. Public speaking as a liberal art. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978.